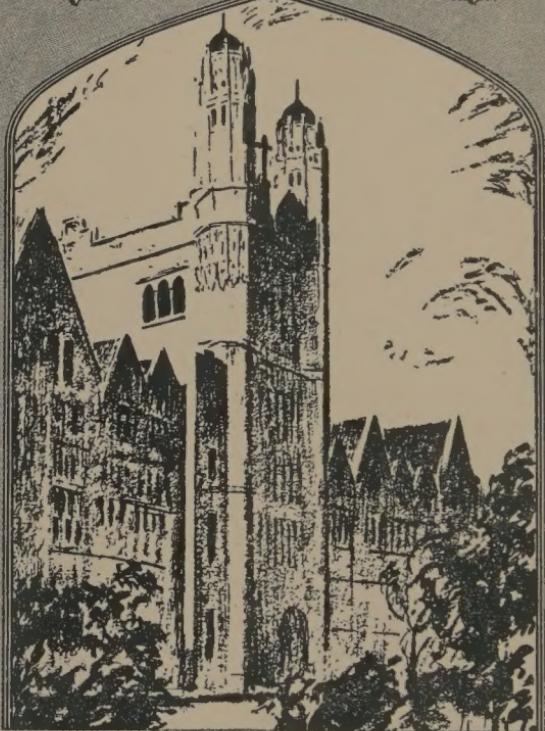


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THE SONNET TO-DAY—AND YESTERDAY

BY

DAVID MORTON

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To
R. F. P.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
DISCUSSION	3
APPENDIX	57

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

The Sonnet Today—and Yesterday

I

I HAD occasion, recently, to make a survey of contemporary sonnet literature, for selective purposes. In serving those purposes, I sought, first, for good poetry, and allowed good sonnets to take care of themselves. I believe that the most authentic and enduring poetry is the passion and dream and memory of life, become articulate upon the lips of the finer spirits; it is the joy and grief and wonder, the adoration and pity and terror which dwell always at the heart of life, risen to a filled intensity, and trembling half-unconsciously into speech. It is a young girl singing softly to herself; it is an old man beginning to remember by the fire; the lover speaking to a beloved image and to no other, in the stillness of his own heart. These are the voices that we hear in poetry. They are

4 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

the voices of the immortal presences that generation after generation visit the soul of man and speak to him and through him in a language whose phrase and fashion are adapted to the day, but whose accent is the authentic accent of the unchanging human spirit.

In this view, poetry is something more than a transcription of life; it is something more, even, than the expression of life; and in that mystical identity of the “Word,” and the thing, it becomes one and inseparable with life. Here, in a given moment, life rises to an overflowing fullness, and commits itself to the spoken word, and thereby achieves a special and exquisite immortality—an immortality, which we call literature, but which is, in deed and in truth, life over again, intricate and varied and lovely, as life itself is intricate and varied and lovely, and dark and passionate and strange, as life itself is all these things, at once and by turns.

II

To say this concerning the essential nature of poetry, and have done, would be to leave the phenomenon at the moment of occurrence. Beyond this, there are certain qualities so consistently present in the finest poetry that we come to think of

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 5

them as being of the essence of poetry, itself—remoteness, repose, complete catharsis of feeling, finality of expression. I say that we have come to expect these qualities in the finest poetry; not that they are held up as arbitrary or academic requirements which poetry must consciously strive to fulfill; nor, indeed, are they set down with any finality. But the poetry in which the listening and eager spirit of man has recognized its own voice speaking, and which man has therefore taken home as a priceless and living heritage, has been poetry that possessed these qualities in varying number and degree.

To inquire too closely into the process by which these qualities come to take their place in the finished poem is a thankless and nearly futile business. When the last word has been said, much remains unexplained. Yet certain observations are pertinent, as leading up to a discussion of the rôle played by “form.”

I strongly suspect that this quality of “remoteness” results from the instinctive and unerring selection of the essential and eternal element in experience, shorn of irrelevant and obscuring immediacies. The accidental and transient fall away; the essential and lasting stand, in a perspective that

6 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

takes no account of the moment or of the things of the moment. It is as though the experience, however recent, were seen in the long view of memory, with its refining eliminations, its ultimate revelations. Those readers whose appreciation of the glowing and passionate poetry on the instant, makes it difficult for them to adopt Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity," may find here a hint as to the character of the process. The refinement and elimination, the election and emergence, are most commonly performed by memory "in tranquillity"; but the process is sometimes achieved on the instant, with an instinctive and revealing discrimination no less unerring than memory. With one poet the process is the one, with another poet it is the other: the instant and instinctive selection, or the revelation through the reducing medium of distance. The result is the same: the emergence of the significant image, naked and radiant and timeless, unclouded by the irrelevant and the accidental and the temporary.

Thus possessed in a dream, where all timeliness falls away, an effect not alone of remoteness, but of composure, also, results. This composure, this quality of "repose" which the mind somehow feels to be present in all great art, arises, in part, I believe,

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 7

from the absence of the temporary and the apparent emergence of the lasting, the continuing, the eternal. There are those who demur at the high regard in which this element of repose is held by art criticism—supposing it to be in conflict with the passion and motion at the heart of life. But the passion and motion are not stilled in great and composed art; they are present, in a continence and continuance convincing of self-integrity and survival through a world of change. This quality of composure, in the circumstances, comes to be something very like the meaning of Carlyle in his phrases “the rest of infinite motion . . . the sleep of a spinning top.”

To suppose that such processes as those mentioned above . . . elimination and selection, from which the qualities of remoteness and repose result—to suppose that such processes are a conscious and calculating performance, is to fall into the error that all such analysis as this encourages. The faculty of judgment, upon which conscious selection would be predicated, is not operative in any deliberative fashion. The selective process, of course, is instantaneous and instinctive. So with the process of complete catharsis of feeling, there is very little of conscious purpose on the part of the poet.

8 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

Again, it is a matter of instinctive feeling as to just how and just how completely “this dangerous stuff may be drawn off the soul.” But you and I, in reading the poem, may bring to it our conscious and deliberative judgment, after reference to our state of feeling, and give our opinion as to whether the emotional purgation has been complete. The poet’s own feeling of “purification” is his guide. We, as readers, apply a corresponding test—and judge the poem successful or unsuccessful, accordingly.

Finality of expression is one of those literary qualities instantly recognizable in the event, and not in the least susceptible of analysis. There is the unerring selection of the word, the precise turn of phrase, the ultimate fitness of form, plus something beyond definition which, along with these others, contributes to the feeling of inevitability.

III

In the foregoing I have said nothing of technical considerations, in the narrow sense, as they have to do with the sonnet. This, because I preferred to approach sonnet literature, as one would—and should—approach any poetic expression: through a

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 9

discussion of poetic impulse and fruition, coming in due time and with lighter emphasis to the form which that impulse and fruition chose. Poetry in the sonnet form has suffered peculiarly through the tactics of criticism in focusing attention on the fact of the form, at expense of the poetry. One may take up a critical discussion of a collection of lyrics or narratives with confidence that the intelligent critic will treat the poetry and its significance for the spirit of man. But that same critic, confronted with poetry in the sonnet form, will discuss the product in terms of the form and the requirements of the form. The sonnet's technical formalities come first with him. Any man, at a moment's thought, knows this is false emphasis, a foolish reversal, a silly perversion of interest. Yet, the method persists—to the delight of the technician, and to the despair of the poet who hoped he had written a poem, not merely made a sonnet. Many of the poets, themselves—in hang-over moments from inspiration—have contributed to the distortion, by writing sonnets on the sonnet form as a theme. The result of all this has been that it is exceedingly difficult to recapture the viewpoint that the sonnet form was created by instinctive modes of thought and feeling, that it reflects the structure

10 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

and movement of those modes, and serves their needs. It has no integrity and no importance—and should have no interest—beyond that.

All this would seem to be sufficiently obvious, when thus set down. But the word needs to be said for the sake of poetry which is filled with significant feeling, articulate with the spirit of man in travail—and becomes, alas! an exhibit of form.

In acquiring an understanding of the essential nature of the sonnet, an analysis of the finished product reveals certain general characteristics. But such analysis is neither so profitable nor so impressive of the high authenticity of the form, as a vigilant watching of the psychological process of which the sonnet is the natural product. I believe it is possible to “plot,” in a general way, the characteristic mental processes antecedent to expression in the sonnet form.

It is a general psychological observation that one kind of single idea or emotion grows through an ascending curve, and survives, in altered character or intensity or direction, beyond the initial zenith of ascendancy. Once it has achieved full growth and intensity, its force is not entirely spent, but continues to manifest itself in this secondary existence where the intensity may be of a different pitch,

the character altered, the direction changed. One is reminded of the career of a rocket fired into the night sky—the accumulated momentum during ascendancy, the arrival at the zenith,—and the soft falling of many colored stars. And—again as with the rocket—this secondary phase or development is implicit in the nature of the first. It may take on any one of several different vestiges, but it will be a continuation of some element present in the first phase—apprehension of the universality of a truth glimpsed first in a particular circumstance, or of a spiritual analogy for what began as an observation in the natural world, or, it may be, a revelation of the ultimate significance of what was seen at first in limited vision, or—most common of all—a subsidence, a declension of the initial idea or emotion, through a lesser intensity, through a briefer space of time. But whatever the second phase of the idea or emotion, the relation to the first is so obvious and inevitable, that the effect of unity is unimpaired.

Thus might be plotted the career of the single idea or emotion, from inception, through growth and development, to the final spending of itself. In the act of expression, such an idea or emotion would instinctively seek external correspondences for these internal phenomena. The instrument

12 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

which it would fashion for its needs would possess certain characteristics: a small compass, a division within unity, a close integration. Choice would be influenced, also, in favor of a length somewhat in excess of the epigram—for growth and a secondary development are felt in the premises; and somewhat less than the ode—for the single idea was felt compactly. Moreover, the form thus being shaped of eager necessity, would possess a closely unified integrity in each of its parts, and an equally close integration of the two parts. Also, the poetic intelligence would seek instinctively for a mode of expression suitable, both in scope and character, for achieving the effects of remoteness, repose, catharsis of feeling, and finality.

Let me emphasize, here—what I hope my language has indicated—that I am not speaking, now, of the deliberate experiments and quests of a conscious literary artist—such as those conducted by Guittone, the forerunner of Petrarch. Instead, I am seeking to understand the un-self-conscious poetic intelligence in its instinctive and untutored effort to express itself—and in that effort shaping an instrument felt instinctively to be suitable and adequate for a peculiar, specific need.

In such qualities as those elected by the searching

mind, in the circumstances—small compass, division into two closely integrated parts, each of which is, in itself, closely unified, and the opportunity for achieving the effects of remoteness, repose, catharsis—in all of this, the reader will already have seen foreshadowings of the sonnet form, in its essential characteristics. And, indeed, in some such fashion as this, presumably, the elements of the form first came into literature—to serve the specific needs of a distinctive mode of the mind. As everyone knows who thinks about such matters at all, form is elected by—not imposed upon—thought and feeling. The essential characteristics of the sonnet are of this same high election, and bear the warrant of this same sound authenticity.

IV

I am not disposed to discuss at length the various sonnet forms, and so participate largely in the controversy between the purists and the liberals. The issue is rhyme scheme. The distinctive character of the sonnet as a form of poetry rests upon more profound and subtle considerations than rhyme scheme—with whatever varying degrees this or that rhyme scheme may serve to confirm and sup-

14 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

port those considerations. Also, there are—internally, so to speak—variations of mental mode and movement, which suggests the best possible argument for variations in the external form. But contention has reduced itself to a controversy over the granting and withholding of a name—a question of how widely and liberally the term sonnet may be applied. Common sense answers: to such poems as possess the essential characteristics. To go beyond that is to mince and quibble, and to no purpose. For the hungry hearts of men continue to find the bread of life in the sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth and Keats and—impudent heretic!—William Shakespeare, through variations to the number of three or four. This is the test and the reality to be valued. The suffering, rejoicing, dreaming spirit of man has taken for his own, and will not let it go, this various fare, without so much as knowing that it is various. Who cares for this quibble about rhyme schemes, and the conferring and withholding of names? It was for other considerations than this that man possessed himself of these things as so much life and beauty to live by!

As regards the two outstanding sonnet forms, however,—the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean—there are certain points of interest and relevancy.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 15

This, because they have a bearing on the question—important in all expression—of external confirmation for internal structure and movement. Obviously much is gained where expression's external form has a close correspondence with what is felt to be the internal form of the thought. An additional and apt emphasis is achieved, an impressive confirmation. Here is one secret at the heart of style—and here a point of poetry's ascendancy over prose. It is interesting, then, to glance at these two arche-types of the sonnet, in their relation to the structure and movement of the single idea or emotion, as plotted a moment ago. It will be serviceable to place, side by side, the rhyme schemes of the two principal types of sonnets, and to designate them, respectively:

<i>Petrarchan</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>Shakespearean</i>
a		a
b		b
b		a
a		b
a		c
b		d
b		c
a		d
c		e
d		f
e		e
c		f
d		g
e		g

16 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

Obviously, the Petrarchan octave, in its rhyme scheme, affords the more exact and complete correspondence for that mode of single idea which has the character of a virtually indivisible integer, and whose motion might be thought of as a continuously ascending arc. The initial stage of this movement, plotted a b b a, is precisely balanced and continued by the complementary stage of the second a b b a. The unity of the octave and its revolving motion, so to speak, are emphasized and confirmed by the identity of the rhymes, and the binding couplet, a a, serves further the purpose of integration. The rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sestet affords, again, emphatic confirmation for the unity of the secondary phase, the terminals of the final three lines preserving a kinship, by rhyme, with the initial three.

Such discussion, of course, relates to ideal procedure, and tends toward the exceeding folly of trying to reduce to scientific precision the movement of the free human spirit. But the point remains true that the mind moves in accordance with certain general laws of its own nature, which are determinable, and that those movements are more or less accurately reflected in the characteristics of art forms. This discussion is neither more nor less than an attempt to state the scientific ideal of those

movements and their external correspondences in form. What this ideal procedure comes to in practice may be seen in the following translation of a sonnet by Petrarch:

SONNET CLXIV

The heavenly airs from yon green laurel rolled,
Where Love to Phœbus whilom dealt his stroke,
Where on my neck was placed so sweet a yoke
That freedom thence I hope not to behold,
O'er me prevail, as o'er that Arab old
Medusa, when she changed him to an oak;
Nor ever can the fairy knot be broke
Whose light outshines the sun, not merely gold;
I mean of those bright locks, the curled snare
Which folds and fashions with so sweet a grace
My soul, whose humbleness defends alone.
Her mere shade freezes with a cold despair
My heart, and tinges with pale fear my face
And oh! her eyes have power to make me stone.

(Translation by MACGREGOR.)

As the Petrarchan sonnet appears in literature—both in the Italian of such authors as Michael Angelo, Petrarch, himself, Campanella and others, and in the English of such writers as Wordsworth, Rossetti and Mr. Bridges, the Laureate—the welding of the two parts of the octave is neither so complete nor so general as this imaginary ideal might

18 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

lead us to expect. There is—more commonly than not, perhaps—a distinct termination of one phase with line four, and the beginning of another with line five. The following translation of a sonnet by Michael Angelo is fairly representative of the kind and degree of division that is common enough:

THE DEFENSE OF NIGHT

O night, O sweet thou sombre span of time!
All things find rest upon their journey's end—
Whoso hath praised thee well doth apprehend;
And whoso honors thee, hath wisdom's prime.
Our cares thou canst to quietude sublime;
For dews and darkness are of peace the friend:
Often by thee in dreams upborne, I wend
From earth to heaven, where yet I hope to climb.
Thou shade of death, through whom the soul at length
Shuns pain and sadness hostile to the heart,
Whom mourners find their last and sure relief!
Thou dost restore our suffering flesh to strength
Driest our tears, assuagest every smart,
Purging the spirits of the pure from grief.

(Translation by JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS.)

The Shakespearean rhyme scheme, as shown in skeleton on a preceding page would indicate very plainly, I think, a slight variation in the mental process, in the premises. Let us say that a movement of the mind

which would fashion such an octave—(a b a b—c d c d)—would be one whose unity was divisible into two parts, closely articulated, to be sure, but not indivisibly welded—for it has dispensed with such identity of rhyming in the two parts and such a welding couplet (a a) as we had in the Petrarchan octave. The Shakespearean sestet would seem to indicate, in its rhyme scheme, a third stage of progress through four lines—with a periodic climax, closely unified, emphatically integrated. The following sonnet by Shakespeare, reveals the correspondence:

Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And deliver the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow;
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

Just as the actual Petrarchan sonnets often fail to exemplify the ideal welding suggested by the

20 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

“welding couplet” in the octave, so the Shakespearean form offers examples of departure from its different ideal. There are a good many sonnets in this form which show no division after line four—contrary to what we might expect—ideally—from the rhyme scheme. The following, by Sir Walter Raleigh scarcely pauses for breath at line four:

ON SPENSER'S FAERY QUEEN

Methought I saw the grave where Laura lay,
Within that temple where the vestal flame
Was wont to burn; and passing by that way
To see that buried dust of living fame,
Whose tomb fair Love and fairer Virtue kept,
All suddenly I saw the Faery Queen:
At whose approach the soul of Petrarch wept;
And from thenceforth those graces were not seen,
For they this Queen attended; in whose stead
Oblivion laid him down on Laura's hearse.
Hereat the hardest stones were seen to bleed,
And groans of buried ghosts the heavens did pierce,
Where Homer's spright did tremble for all grief
And curse the access of that celestial thief.

Here, again, it is time to say that we are speaking of ideal procedure. In the practical event, both the Petrarchan sonnets, and the Shakespearean sonnets will be found to vary widely, in more ways than I have indicated, from what their respective

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 21

rhyme schemes would seem to indicate as to their ideal structure and movement. It is to be remembered that in both cases, finally, other considerations than an instinctive fashioning have been at work. The Petrarchan sonnet, as we know it, is the final product of long experiment, antedating Petrarch—experiments conducted by self-conscious literary craftsmen, influenced by the traditions of their language and literature, and by the modes and fashions of their day and country. The Shakespearean sonnet represents one result of ingenious and—again—self-conscious experimentation, with the Petrarchan sonnet as a basis. All this, in both instances, must modify any claim made for the complete and formalized sonnet as an instinctive mode of expression. But it remains true that, in general, the structure and movement of the sonnet—whether it be Petrarchan or Shakespearean—corresponds closely to the structure and movement of the mind under the impulse of a single idea.

The variations from these two arche-types of sonnet would furnish material for many pages of discussion; such discussion, however, would be but further attention to the subject of correspondence between the structure of the idea and the structure of the form. In brief, however, it is interesting to

22 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

note that a less close cementing of the two parts of the Italian octave is sometimes reflected in an altered rhyme scheme, a b b a c b b c, thus disposing of the “welding couplet,” (Edward Dowden, *A Singer’s Plea*, and some of Lamb’s sonnets)—and, conversely, a closer unity in the Shakespearean is reflected in the rhyme scheme a b a b b c b c (Wilfred Scawen Blunt’s *On the Shortness of Time*, and, of course, some of Spenser’s). In the English form the sestet varies but rarely from the alternating rhymes and couplet, but among the numerous variations in the Italian sestet—so numerous that the force of a model is scarcely felt—it is interesting to note the wide usage of the arrangement c d d c e e. This would seem to indicate—even among those writers whose choice is for the Italian form—a widely felt need for a sestet which offers facilities for emphatic finality, such as a closing couplet serves.

V

If these technical considerations seem to the general reader to be remote from the realities of poetry, the historical question of the origin and genealogy of the sonnet form must seem scarcely less so. It lies outside the purpose of this note to follow the several conjectured genealogies. It is for the his-

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 23

torian, not for me, to identify the authentic direct ancestor, among the several claimants more or less noisily supported by their several adherents. About as far as general agreement gets is back to the Italian sonneto as a precursor of the sonnet—but at that point the critical historians diverge, some claiming that this same sonneto is derived from a song-form in Provence, others that it grew out of the Italian stornello, a three line poem, and yet others that the Greek epigram was the pattern upon which the sonneto was moulded.

What is of more interest and relevancy, here, is to notice, in all these early forms and others, the existence of the fundamental principle of the sonnet—*i.e.*, the statement of a single poetic idea, followed by another derivative or related statement. In the stornello, there is the plain statement and its emotional derivative. The pattern and the process are clear in the following stornello, for example, which is taken from the folk songs of Tuscany:

I stand at the window and gaze on the sea,
I watch all the fishing boats coming to lee;—
The boat of my sweetheart it comes not to me.

In the Greek epigram, there is the same singleness of idea, and the same cleavage within unity—a primary

24 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

statement, followed by a secondary one associated with and prompted by the first, where it is not positively derived from it. The following epigram from the Greek anthology, is in the pattern.

Home to their stalls at eve the oxen came
Down from the mountains through the snow wreaths
 deep,
But ah, Therimachus sleeps the long sleep
'Neath yonder oak, lulled by the levin-flame.

And in the following, also from the Greek anthology, the characteristic in point is even more marked:

Orphus! No more the rocks, the woods no more
Thy strains shall lure, no more the savage herds,
Nor hail, nor driving clouds, nor tempest's roar,
Nor chaffing bellows list thy lulling words;
For thou art dead: and all the Muses mourn,
But most Calliope, thy mother dear.
Shall we, then, reft of sons, lament forlorn,
When e'en the gods must for their offspring fear?

One could go on multiplying examples indefinitely out of the Greek anthology, but this characteristic of the Greek epigram is familiar to all.

A fresher interest attaches, perhaps, to instances of its persistent appearances in even earlier literatures—as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the oldest book in the world. The following, which is

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 25

designated “The Chapter of Giving a Heart to Osiris Ani in the Underworld,” has the familiar structure:

May my heart be with me in the House of Hearts.
May my breast be with me in the House of Hearts.
May my heart be with me and may it rest there,
Or I shall not eat of the cakes of Osiris on the Eastern
side of the Lake of Flowers,
Neither shall I have a boat wherein to go down the Nile,
 nor another wherein to go up,
Nor shall I be able to sail down the Nile with thee.
May my mouth be given me, that I may speak therewith,
And my two hands and arms to overthrow my foe,
May the doors of Heaven be opened unto me.
May Seb, the Prince of the gods, open wide his two jaws
 unto me;
May he open my two eyes, which are blind-folded;
May be cause me to stretch apart my two legs which are
 bound together;
And may Anpu make my thighs firm so that I may stand
 upon them.
May the goddess Sekhet make me to rise so that I may
 ascend unto heaven,
And may that be done which I command in the house of
 the double of Ptah (i.e. Memphis)

I understand with my heart,
I have gained the mastery over my heart,
I have gained the mastery over my two hands,
I have gained the mastery over my legs,

26 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

I have gained the power to do whatever my double
pleaseth.

My soul shall not be fettered to my body at the gates of
the underworld;

But I shall enter in peace and I shall come forth in peace.

(Translation by E. A. WALLIS BUDGE.)

In the sacred books of the East, the same structure is to be found. In the following philosophic poem written 3,000 years ago in one of the Vedas of the Brahman, is a clear counterpart of what is known, in sonnet lingo, as development of idea, followed by its solution:

“What is Self?”

“It is the spirit made of understanding among the Breaths, the inward light within the heart, that walks abroad, abiding the same through both worlds. He meditates, as it were: He hovers about, as it were. Turned to sleep, He passes beyond this world, these shapes of death.”

The spirit at birth enters the body, and is bent with evils; at death He passes out, and leaves evils.”

A sonneteer today, wishing to put that passage into the formal sonnet would find a minimum of reshaping to do. The meter and rhyme, of course, are to be supplied, but as to structure, the skeleton stands ready, every part in place.

Those whose early education was such as to print on their minds the pattern of Biblical style will scarcely need to be reminded of the prominence of this duality within unity, this division within singleness, where a single emotional idea is precipitated—sometimes through parallelisms, at other times through antitheses. In the Psalms, in the lamentations of Job, in the Song of Solomon, in portions of Ecclesiastes—wherever, in short, there is occasion for the expression of an isolated, single emotional idea—the outlines of this same pattern emerge, with varying degrees of approach to the ideal. One thinks, of course, of the Twenty-third Psalm, that sensitive and exquisite poem, where feeling and form culminate in an emphatic affirmation of faith in the closing lines. But for the sake of a fresher view, it will be more serviceable to take a less familiar passage, perhaps. Accordingly, I set down here the 126th Psalm, arranged in a way to call attention to external division in form to correspond to the internal division in thought:

When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,
We were like them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue
with singing:
Then said they among the heathen,

28 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

The Lord hath done great things for them.
The Lord hath done great things for us,
Whereof, we are glad.

Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the South.

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed,
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
Bringing his sheaves with him.

The Japanese tanka and hokku—those delicate and beautiful poems which are the despair of Westerners—both possess, structurally, the two-phase feature, but I shall be content to quote one of each. First, the tanka, a very old one, by the poet Absutada, who was an imperial counsellor:

When I am very old I shall be fain
To live once more these present days of pain . . .
Even as now I yearn in silly sooth
To bear again the heart-aches of my youth.

And this hokku, an even briefer form, limited to seventeen syllables, is by Basho, an early and highly venerated master of the form:

Old battlefield, fresh with spring flowers again—
All that is left of the dream
Of twice ten thousand warriors slain.

All of these citations, from the Egyptian Book of the Dead of more than two thousand years before Christ, through the Bible and the sacred books of the East, the Greek Anthology and Italian and Japanese forms, possess this same quality of two-fold development within unity. It does not seem too much to say that they reflect a mode of thought and feeling—a way of the mind when it moves—in those countries and in those times. And where a mode of thinking and feeling is so old, so universal and so persistent, the presumption arises that that mode is instinctive and inherent in man's mental and emotional processes.

This pushes over into the realm of the purely academic the question as to the precise genealogical line of the sonnet, as to just which, of many possible forms, was the immediate authentic ancestor. What is more interesting than this is the reflection that any one of the many early forms in many countries—from Egypt to Japan—possessed a miniature, a model in the lean and the little, so far as the essential character of the form is concerned. And the point of all this, which I feel most strongly, is the evidence it offers of the high authority for the sonnet's mode, since man's own passionate spirit created the form in its own image. To that early and—shall we say instinctive?—pattern, the sonnet con-

30 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

tinues to conform—elaborated in its several parts, to serve more elaborate purposes, but preserving the integrity of the pattern, in its parts and in their inter-relation.

VI

One of the provocations for the survey referred to in the first paragraph of this book was the belief that sonnet literature of the Twentieth Century possesses certain peculiar characteristics not impressive in the sonnet literature of earlier periods. Such a statement should be taken as meaning no more than it says. Any sonnet that might be offered as exemplifying some one such peculiar characteristic, might, quite conceivably, be matched in that characteristic by a sonnet discovered in the Elizabethan or the Victorian period. But the point is that this characteristic would be a prevalent one in the sonnet literature of today, and exceptional and rare in the sonnet literature of an earlier day.

Any formal listing of these peculiar characteristics, and any emphatic insistence upon their prominent and ubiquitous presence would set up expectances which the few offered examples would fail to satisfy. The most that can be done is to indicate certain points of departure from the sonnet as we have

known it in the past; to notice certain prevalent tendencies peculiar to the sonnet of today.

I believe that a reader coming fresh from a collection of English sonnets written prior to 1900, and turning the pages of a collection written since that year, would be struck, first of all, by a certain informality in the Twentieth Century product. This would be the more surprising to him, as occurring in a species where formality—formality of thought and manner and language—was presumed to be inseparable from the instrument, itself. The sonnet, indeed, after Milton at any rate, was reserved for such occasions as demanded formality of speech, when they did not demand positive grandeur. Thus the persuasion was nourished in favor of the sonnet as the instrument reserved for subjects of a large dignity, to be addressed with the proper formality of manner, and in appropriate language. So that we can imagine the sensations of a reader who has just been through a sonnet of Miltonic grandeur, let us say, when he encounters Edna St. Vincent Millay's:

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!
Give back my book, and take my kiss instead.
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard:
“What a big book for such a little head.”

32 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

Come, I will show you, now, my newest hat,
And you may watch me purse my mouth, and prink!
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that
I never again shall tell you what I think.
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;
You will not catch me reading any more:
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;
And some day when you knock and push the door,
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

A reader of Milton or Wordsworth, or even of Keats or Longfellow, would make this transition, not without considerable shock. And when he analyzed the cause his sensations, I believe a large part of his surprise would be at the informality—the flippancy, even—of subject matter, manner and language, in such a place! I have chosen, here, an extreme example, but it is an extremity arrived at by degrees of informality that render the poem not in the least shocking to the reader conversant with sonnets since 1900.

Something of the same relaxed formality, in favor of more natural utterance, is to be seen also in this sonnet—as in several others—by Rupert Brooke:

THE BUSY HEART

Now that we've done our best and worst, and parted,
I would fill my mind with thoughts that will not rend.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 33

(O heart, I do not dare go empty-hearted)
I'll think of Love in books, Love without end;
Women with child, content; and old men sleeping;
And wet strong ploughlands, scarred for certain grain;
And babes that weep and so forget their weeping;
And the young heavens, forgetful after rain;
And evening hush, broken by homing wings;
And Song's nobility, and Wisdom holy,
That live, we dead. I would think of a thousand things,
Lovely and durable, and taste them slowly,
One after one, like tasting a sweet food.
I have need to busy my heart with quietude.

In both of these—but more especially in Miss Millay's, of course—there is the Twentieth Century poet's unwillingness to wait for a sublime subject before using the sonnet form and his unwillingness to put on surplice and robes of manner and language, when he *does* use the form. This same reader would make the transition more easily, I believe, from a collection of Elizabethan sonnets to one drawn from the Twentieth Century, for the reason that the sonnet, before Milton, had not come to be regarded as a form to be used primarily for the treatment of noble themes in majestic language.

The sonnets of the Elizabethans marked the form for a time as the proper vehicle for amorous poetry—and amorous poetry not very profoundly stirred with genuine passion, but notable chiefly for

34 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

pretty conceits and graceful and courtly language. In this tendency, the fourteen line stanza was in danger of becoming the recognized medium for light and complimentary verse. Shakespeare, it is true, recognized its possibilities for better and wider uses—as did Henry Constable, in his solemn sonnet “On the Death of Sir Philip Sidney,” and John Donne, and Drummond of Hawthornden, the one in his noble sonnet on “Death,” and the other in sonnets on certain aspects of nature, intimate and vivid and revealing. To these names would have to be added William Browne of Tavistock, but between Spenser and Milton, the sonnet, exclusive of these men and Shakespeare, remains primarily an instrument of pretty fancy and graceful compliment. The daintiness and delicacy of many of these poems are miraculous performances in the hands of such men as Sir Philip Sidney and Spenser and Samuel Daniel, but they are performances, still; and one turns, for genuine poetry, to the exceptions among their contemporaries and near-contemporaries—to Browne, and Donne, and Drummond of Hawthornden. Here is genuine feeling, unselfconscious emotion finding utterance in simple and beautiful speech.

The Twentieth Century sonneteer is nearer to

these men in manner and intent, than to their numerous contemporaries. The feeling and manner and—excepting, of course, the idiom of the period—even the language of the following sonnet by Drummond of Hawthornden, would go far toward relieving it of any strangeness in a Twentieth Century collection:

SPRING BEREAVED

Sweet spring, thou turn'st with all thy goodly train,
Thy head with flames, thy mantle bright with flow'rs;
The zephyrs curl the green locks of the plain,
The clouds for joy in pearls weep down their show'rs.
Thou turn'st, sweet youth, but ah! my pleasant hours,
And happy days with thee come not again;
The sad memorials only of my pain
Do with thee turn which turn my sweets in sours.
Thou art the same which still thou wast before,
Delicious, wanton, amiable, fair;
But she, whose breath embalmed thy wholesome air,
Is gone—nor gold nor gems her can restore.
Neglected virtue, seasons go and come,
While thine forgot, lie closed in the tomb.

Place beside this the following two sonnets, one by the English poet, W. W. Gibson, and the other by an American, Lizette Woodworth Reese, both of our own day, and there is a certain kinship in the

36 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

intimate feeling and the unstudied ease and naturalness of manner and language.

TENANTS



Suddenly out of dark and leafy ways,
We came upon the little house asleep
In cold blind stillness, shadowless and deep,
In the white magic of the full moon-blaze:
Strangers without the gate, we stood agaze,
Fearful to break that quiet, and to creep
Into the house that had been ours to keep
Through a long year of happy nights and days.

So unfamiliar in the white moon-gleam,
So old and ghostly like a house of dream
It seemed, that over us there stole the dread
That even as we watched it, side by side,
The ghosts of lovers who had lived and died
Within its walls, were sleeping in our bed.

SPICEWOOD

By LIZETTE WOODWORTH REESE

The spicewood burns along the gray, spent sky,
In moist, unchimneyed places, in a wind,
That whips it all before and all behind,
Into one thick, rude flame, now low, now high;
It is the first, the homeliest thing of all—
At sight of it the lad that by it fares,
Whistles afresh his foolish, town-caught airs—
A thing so honey-colored and so tall!

It is as though the young year, ere he pass,
To the white riot of the cherry-tree,
Would fain accustom us, or here or there,
To his new sudden ways with bough and grass,
So starts with what is humble, plain to see,
And all familiar as a cup, a chair.

In these matters of intimate feeling and the easy grace of natural speech,¹ the modern sonneteer is closer to Drummond than to others nearer in point of time. But for us the character of the sonnet was so emphatically fixed by Milton, first, and by Nineteenth Century writers, later, that we scarcely think back of them when we think of the sonnet. Somehow, the vehicles carrying the easy and graceful and often trivial performance of the Elizabethans has seemed a thing separate and apart from that bearing the noble austeries of Milton and the magnificent measures of Wordsworth. And it was primarily of these latter that we thought when the word ‘sonnet’ was said. We turn to the Twentieth Century sonnet with the outline of that exalted thought still in our minds, and the tread of those stately measures still in our ears. These were qualities in the poetry of men of such profound genius that these qualities came

¹ See also pages 57 and 58 and 59 of Appendix.

38 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

to be thought of as themselves necessary and generic attributes of the sonnet form. Certain subjects men considered “worthy” of treatment in the form, certain others, not worthy. A certain dignified, even majestic manner, was appropriate; anything less than that, was not.

I would not wish to give the impression that the note of “high seriousness” for which the sonnet was reserved in the preceding century, is absent from the sonnets of our day. It is not that nobleness of thought and majesty of language have abandoned the sonnet, but that the form is used less exclusively for these things. A Nineteenth Century reader, jealous of the sonnet’s serious mood and language would find little to complain of in the following, by George Sterling, of our own day:

ON THE SKULL OF SHAKESPEARE

I

Without how small, within how strangely vast!
What stars of terror had their path in thee!
What music of the heavens and the sea
Lived in a sigh or thundered on the blast!
Here swept the gleam and pageant of the Past,
As Beauty trembled to her fate’s decree;
Here swords were forged for armies yet to be,
And tears were found too dreadful not to last.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 39

Here stood the seats of judgment and its light,
To whose assizes all our dreams were led—
Our best and worst, our Paradise and Hell;
And in this room delivered now to night,
The mortal put its question to the dead,
And worlds were weighed, and God's deep shadow fell.

II

Here an immortal river had its rise,
Tho' dusty now the fountain whence it ran
So swift and beautiful with good to man.
Here the foundation of an empire lies—
The ruins of a realm seen not with eyes,
That now the vision of a gnat could scan.
Here wars were fought within a little span,
Whose echoes yet resound on human skies.

Life, on her rainbow road from dust to dust,
Split here her wildest iris, still thine own,
Master, and with thy soul and ashes one!
Thy wings are distant from our years of lust,
Yet he who liveth not by bread alone
Shall see thee as that angel in the sun.

If there are fewer sonnets in this tone and manner than formerly—and I think there are—I suspect it is because in this, as in other things, the modern seeks emancipation from conventionalized thought and feeling and hardened form and manner. Used so long as to become a model, their appearance now

40 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

is under suspicion of being modelling, merely. The grand manner is in disrepute, as having too often masqueraded as grandeur.

It is more pleasant and more profitable, though, to notice what has come into the sonnet than what has, in some instances, nearly passed out of it. Loftiness and grandeur and majesty necessarily stand the communicant off at a respectful distance. A cathedral possesses no intimacy of character and inspires no intimacy of feeling. It possesses and inspires other things, to be sure, but not intimacy. And where these qualities of majesty and grandeur depart from the sonnet, it is intimacy that comes in. There is a gain in the sweet and common uses of human experience. There is closer communion between poet and reader—because the poet is speaking of life as it is commonly felt, and he is speaking of it in the unstudied language of natural speech. Milton, in his sonnet “On His Deceased Wife,” calls into attendance such names as Alcestis and “Jove’s great son,” and expands the language to include “Heaven,” so that his grief takes on a certain dignity and amplitude that make for impressiveness—all of which, both in process and in effect, is alien to the modern sonneteer. The Twentieth Century writer prefers to speak the simple language of human grief, and—so

far as any conscious purpose is present—to communicate his feeling to the reader, not to impress him. The lack of ostentation, this approach to simple naturalness, was foreshadowed, to a degree, in Meredith and Rossetti, and other less conspicuous figures of the preceding century; but their work stood apart, and the character of the great body of sonnet literature remained—to the end of the century—"grand" and formal.

Something of this change in feeling, in method and in effect becomes apparent if a reading of Milton's poem is followed by a reading of a sonnet by Arthur Davison Ficke, one of the best of America's sonneteers today, and another by the English poet, Iris Tree. First, the Milton sonnet:

ON HIS DECEASED WIFE

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave.
Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.
Mine as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint,
Purification in the old Law did save,
And such, as yet once more I trust to have
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,

42 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd
So clear, as in no face with more delight
But, Oh, as to embrace me she inclin'd,
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

And then, this, by Mr. Ficke, on a similar theme:

They brought me tidings; and I did not hear
More than a fragment of the words they said.
Their further speech died dull upon my ear;
For my rapt spirit otherwhere had fled—
Fled unto you in other times and places.
Old memories winged about me in glad flight.
I saw your lips of longing and delight,—
Your grave glad eyes beyond their chattering faces.
I saw a world where you have been to me
More than the sun, more than the wakening wind.
I saw a brightness that they could not see.
And yet I seemed as smitten deaf and blind.
I heard but fragments of the words they said.
Life wanes. The sunlight darkens. You are dead.

And this, by Iris Tree:

TO MY FATHER

(SIR HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE, 1853-1917)

I cannot think that you have gone away,
You loved the earth—and life lit up your eyes,
And flickered in your smile that would surmise
Death as a song, a poem, or a play.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 43

You were reborn afresh with every day,
And baffled fortune in some new disguise.
Ah! can it perish when the body dies,
Such youth, such love, such passion to be gay?
We shall not see you come to us and leave
A conqueror—nor catch on fairy wing
Some slender fancy—nor new wonders weave
Upon the loom of your imagining.
The world is wearier, grown dark to grieve
Her child that was a pilgrim and a king.

This lack of self-conscious exaltation in emotion, extends, of course, beyond the domain of human relations; the change is equally noticeable when the sonneteer today is stirred into speech by some aspect of the natural world. Here again it is, not the largely impressive thing alone, but the small and cherished and intimately dear which the sonnet is used to celebrate. Instead of the awed approach toward the “mighty Being” (with a capital “B”) in Wordsworth’s “Evening on Calais Beach,” we have the half-wistful and half-desperate affection for certain lovely and unlasting things, very simply spoken, in Hortense Flexner’s “Treasure,” published a few years ago. Again, a reading of these two poems in succession will yield more than comment can make plain. First, Wordsworth’s

EVENING ON CALAIS BEACH

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven is on the sea;
Listen! the mighty Being is awake
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought
Thy nature is not therefore less divine;
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshipp'st at the temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we knew it not.

And now Miss Flexner's

TREASURE

The little pilfering hands of hours and days
Bury more loveliness and treasured gold,
Savor and essence, cloud and warm-scent and haze,
Small things accustomed, all too frail to hold.
But I would have remembrance full and keen,
Nor yield one leaf, or cloud, or shadow's blue,
One little thrusting wind, one hill's tall green,
The outer way of wonder we passed through.
The fear grows with me that I shall forget,
Never you love, but half-seen things of grace,

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 45

Beauty we took and marveled at and set
Aside, half-blindly, marking not its place;
This wealth put by, this gold too faint and rare,
I cannot count—and yet I cannot spare.¹

No, the sonnet no longer is reserved for the sublime subject, and no longer is the instrument of majestic utterance, only. These things still find place in the sonnet literature of today—notably in the work of Robert Bridges, in England, and George Edward Woodberry, in America—but not these things, alone. The reader cannot count upon “high seriousness,” even, when he encounters the fourteen-line stanza on the printed page. There is no longer such a thing as the “proper” subject for a sonnet, nor such a thing as the “appropriate” manner and language. Any idea or emotion felt in the structure and pattern of the sonnet, is treated in that form—over the full range of thought and feeling, from sublimity at one end, to clever flippancy at the other. For one educated to expect the exalted note and exalted note, only, from the sonnet, the following unsublimated picture by the English poet, A. Y. Campbell, must fall strangely upon the ear:

¹See also, Appendix pages 60 and 61 and 62.

THE DROMEDARY

In dreams I see the Dromedary still,
As once in a gay park I saw him stand:
A thousand eyes in vulgar wonder scanned
His humps and hairy neck, and gazed their fill
At his lank shanks and mocked with laughter shrill.
He never moved. And if his Eastern land
Flashed on his eye with stretches of hot sand,
It wrung no mute appeal from his proud will.
He blinked upon the rabble lazily;
And still some trace of majesty forlorn
And a coarse grace remained; his head was high,
Though his gaunt flanks with a great mange were worn;
There was not any yearning in his eye,
But on his lips and nostril infinite scorn.

The nimble wit and grace and epigrammatic turn of some of Miss Millay's work—such as the sonnet beginning “O think not I am faithful to a vow”—stamp it as a very different thing, of course, from the unsmiling gravities of the Nineteenth Century. It approaches more nearly some of the Elizabethan, but even in that association, there is a difference in the simple and direct naturalness, the unstudied speech of the later sonnet.¹

It would be unfortunate if these citations of the sonnet's less serious and profound moments should leave the impression that the Twentieth Century

¹ See also pages 63 and 64.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 47

sonnet is without profundity of feeling and seriousness of mood. It should be unnecessary to say that man still dreams and wonders, sorrows and aspires, adores and remembers, and that these voices in his heart still enlist the service of his lips in beautiful and passionate speech. And in this recurrent miracle, the sonnet has been—in our day, no less than in others—the instrument of articulation for moments of life that have been finely felt and finely spoken.¹

In this modification of the tradition dominated by Milton and the Nineteenth Century writers, in a wider range of subject-matter considered appropriate to the sonnet, in a certain increased intimacy of feeling, not found in the days when the sonnet was given over, predominantly, to the noble and august, and in a corresponding naturalness and informality of manner and language—in all of this, the sonnet has merely shared in the changes that have come over modern poetry in all its forms. This wider comprehensiveness of subject matter, the readier speech about the intimate and usual turns of feeling and thought, and this simple and easy idiom are among the outstanding features of what ten years ago was described as “the new movement” in poetry. But all of this has a peculiar interest in the case of a

¹ See Appendix 65, 66, 67 and 68.

48 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

form on which tradition had placed a special emphasis of exclusiveness of theme and formal majesty of manner. There has been some surprise that the sonnet has survived, at all, in the late passion for “free and full expression,” beyond all imposed restriction. That it has survived, that it has even achieved something like a renaissance, indicates again a certain inherent conformity to instinctive modes of thought and feeling, and an adequacy for their expression.

I would not insist further upon peculiar qualities of the Twentieth Century sonnet. But I would mention, in passing, two uses made of the sonnet form today so extensive as to suggest two distinctive literatures within the sonnet field—that of character portraiture, and that of singing lyricism. Sonnets celebrative of great men have been, of course, common in English literature. Wordsworth’s sonnet on Milton is in a well-known tradition. But we have something different in the meticulously etched-in portraits of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s sonnets, where temperament and character, and career and destiny, are put together in a unified and revealing portrait. The following, by Mr. Robinson, might be matched in intent and method by a score of poems from the same author:

LEFFINGWELL

I—THE LURE

No, no,—forget your Cricket and your Ant,
For I shall never set my name to theirs
That now bespeak the very sons and heirs
Incarnate of Queen Gossip and King Cant.
The case of Leffingwell is mixed, I grant,
And futile seems the burden that he bears;
But are we sounding his forlorn affairs
Who brand him parasite and sycophant?
I tell you, Leffingwell was more than these;
And if he prove a rather sorry knight,
What quiverings in the distance of what light
May have lured him with high promises,
And then gone down?—He may have been deceived;
He may have lied,—he did; and he believed.

II—THE QUICKSTEP

The dirge is over, the good work is done,
All as he would have had it, and we go;
And we who leave him say we do not know
How much is ended or how much begun.
So men have said before of many a one;
So men may say of us when Time shall throw
Such earth as may be needful to bestow
On you and me the covering hush we shun.

Well hated, better loved, he played and lost,
And left us; and we smile at his arrears;
And who are we to know what it all cost,

50 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

Or what we may have wrung from him, the buyer?
The pageant of his failure-laden years
Told ruin of high price. The place was higher.

III—REQUIESCAT

We never knew the sorrow or the pain
Within him, for he seemed as one asleep—
Until he faced us with a dying leap,
And with a blast of paramount, profane,
And vehement valediction did explain
To each of us, in words that we shall keep,
Why we were not to wonder or to weep,
Or ever dare to wish him back again.

He may be now an amiable shade,
With merry fellow-phantoms unafraid
Around him—but we do not ask. We know
That he would rise and haunt us horribly,
And be with us o' nights of a certainty.
Did we not hear him when he told us so?

The portraiture sonnet has as many varieties as there are sonneteers today, and this is only one of the varieties,—the revelation of a peculiar quality of character, sometimes in methods as low-pulsed, urbane and direct as this, sometimes in terms of romantic symbolism and simile.¹

The conception of the sonnet as a stiff and arbitrary form must have been hard put to sustain itself

¹ See Appendix, pages 69, 70 and 71.

in the face of the free and winging lyricism that abounds in the sonnet literature of the past twenty-five years. Poets with the lyric gift have poured out a full-throated and passionate music through these iambic pentameter lines—with no apparent effect of stint and cramp. “Organ music” has been the term most commonly used for the tones of the sonnet, but the following, by Arthur Davison Ficke, suggests something more spontaneously lyrical, and is fairly typical of a kind of sonnet becoming increasingly numerous, with the relaxation and greater flexibility of the medium:

APRIL MOMENT

Come forth! for spring is singing in the boughs
Of every white and tremulous apple tree.
This is the season of eternal vows
But what are vows that they should solace me?
For on the winds wild loveliness is crying,
And in all flowers, wild joy its present worth
Proclaims, as from the dying to the dying—
“Seize, clasp thy hour of sun upon the earth!”
O never dream that fire or beauty stays
More than one April moment in its flight
Toward regions where the sea-drift of all days
Sinks in a vast, desireless, lonely night.
What are eternal vows?—Oh, give me breath
Of one white hour here on the marge of death.

52 The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday

And the following, by Rupert Brooke, is a lyric in fourteen lines.

THE DEAD III

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that un hoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honor has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

I would end this discussion on the note with which it began. Poems in the sonnet form, as in other forms, represents moments at which life reached a passionate intensity, and was translated into speech. Such poems should be read not as sonnet exhibits, but as poetry, as life itself projected in the living pattern that is literature. The fashion changes, the idiom alters, the technique varies, but back of these transitory things, stands the human

Appendix

ON GROWING OLD

Be with me Beauty for the fire is dying,
My dog and I are old, too old for roving,
Man, whose young passion sets the spindrift flying
Is soon too lame to march, too cold for loving.

I take the book and gather to the fire,
Turning old yellow leaves; minute by minute,
The clock ticks to my heart; a withered wire
Moves a thin ghost of music in the spinet.

I cannot sail your seas, I cannot wander
Your cornland, nor your hill-land nor your valleys,
Ever again, nor share the battle yonder
Where the young knight the broken squadron rallies.

Only stay quiet while my mind remembers
The beauty of fire from the beauty of embers.

JOHN MASEFIELD.

TO L. H. B.

(LESLIE HERON BEAUCHAMP, 1894-1915)

Last night for the first time since you were dead
I walked with you, my brother, in a dream.
We were at home again beside the stream
Fringed with tall berry bushes, white and red.
“Don’t touch them; they are poisonous,” I said.
But your hand hovered, and I saw a beam
Of strange, bright laughter flying round your head
And as you stooped I saw the berries gleam.
“Don’t you remember? We called them Dead Man’s
bread!”
I woke and heard the wind moan and the roar
Of the dark water tumbling on the shore.
Where—where is the path of my dream for my eager
feet?
By the remembered stream my brother stands
Waiting for me with berries in his hands.
“These are my body. Sister, take and eat.”

KATHERINE MANSFIELD.

RUPERT BROOKE

Once in my garret—you being far away
Tramping the hills and breathing upland air,
Or so I fancied—brooding in my chair,
I watched the London sunshine feeble and grey
Dapple my desk, too tired to labour more,
When, looking up, I saw you standing there
Although I'd caught no footstep on the stair,
Like sudden April at my open door.

Though now beyond earth's farthest hills you fare,
Song-crowned, immortal, sometimes it seems to me
That, if I listen very quietly,
Perhaps I'll hear a light foot on the stair
And see you, standing with your angel air,
Fresh from the uplands of eternity.

W. W. GIBSON.

THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth, a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

RUPERT BROOKE.

DREAMERS

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.
I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture-shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the rain.

SIEGFRIED SASSOON.

PUTTING IN THE SEED

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree.

(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;
And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,

Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

ROBERT FROST.

NOCTURNE

"Nothin' or everythin' it's got to be,"
You says, and hides your face down on my arm.
"If it meant nothin', 'twouldn't do no harm,
Or either everythin'—but this way—see? . . ."

I feel your tremblin' heart against my coat,
An' the big arc-light moon grins down so cool,
"Go!" I think it says, "You softie fool!" . . .
I love you so it hurts me in my throat. . . .

"Don't make me kiss you; sure, I know you could,"
You're pleadin', "An' we gone too far for play;
I care a lot . . . but yet not so's to say
I love you yet. . . . Aw, help me to be good!" . . .

O darlin', darlin', can't you let it be
Nothin' to you, an' everythin' to me?

JOHN V. A. WEAVER.

SONNET TO A PLOW-WOMAN OF NORWAY

Deep-bosomed, stalwart-limbed, superbly made,
Unconscious of her power and her grace,
Accustomed to the blowzy wind's embrace,
Magnificent, unlettered, unafeard.
She guides her course past interlacing streams
Striding the fields behind her ancient plough,
Or halts beneath some blossoming, frail bough
To rest her beast, and give herself to dreams.
Her eyes survey the road, the moor, the peat,
With wide, untroubled gaze; she plays no part,
No joys rise up to suffocate her heart
Because a smile falls lightly at her feet.
To one who comes for her at dusk, perchance,
She lifts a brief, intoxicated glance.

MARGARET TOD RITTER.

THE HARVEST OF TIME

Time winnows beauty with a fiery wind,
Driving the dead chaff from the living grain.
Some day there will be golden sheaves to bind;
There will be wonder in the world again.
There will be lonely phrases born to power,
There will be words immortal and profound;
Though no man knows the coming of the hour,
And no man knows the sower or the ground.

It may be even now the ranging earth
Lifting to glory some forgotten land
Feels there deep beauty quickening to birth,
Sprung from the sowing of a hidden hand.
Beauty endures though towering empires die.
O, speed the blown chaff down the smoking sky!

HAROLD TROWBRIDGE PULSIFER.

THE SILENCE

A song between two silences Life sings,
A melody 'twixt night and patient night.
He strums his lute against the fading light
To gild the shadow that the gloaming brings,
And love is but a plucking of the strings,
A throb of music staying music's flight,
A little note that hardly shall requite
Thine outstretched hand that mars Life's lute-playings.
Yet, when the last faint echo of that note
Has stirred the cypress-leaves at eventide,
When night has stilled forever Life's white throat,
And his gold lute lies shattered by his side,
We two shall follow through a world remote
The silence whereinto Love's music died.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH.

TO MY DAUGHTER BETTY, THE GIFT OF GOD

In wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown
To beauty proud as was your mother's prime,
In that desired, delayed, incredible time,
You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,
And the dear heart that was your baby throne,
To dice with death. And oh! they'll give you rhyme
And reason: some will call the thing sublime,
And some decry it in a knowing tone.
So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,—
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

THOMAS M. KETTLE.

SONNETS

XXII

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
From dusty bondage into luminous air.
O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
When first the shaft into his vision shone
Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
Who, though once only and then but far away,
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY.

SELF-PORTRAIT

A lens of crystal whose transparency calms
Queer stars to clarity, and disentangles
Fox-fires to form austere refracted angles;
A texture polished on the horny palms
Of vast equivocal creatures, beast or human:
A flint, a substance finer-grained than snow,
Graved with the Graces in intaglio
To set sarcastic sigil on the woman.

This for the mind, and for the little rest
A hollow scooped to blackness in the breast,
The simulacrum of a cloud, a feather:
Instead of stone, instead of sculptured strength,
This soul, this vanity, blown hither and thither
By trivial breath, over the whole world's length.

ELINOR WYLIE.

JULIAN GRENFELL

(1888–1915)

Because of you we will be glad and gay,
Remembering you, we will be brave and strong;
And hail the advent of each dangerous day,
And meet the last adventure with a song.
And, as you proudly gave your jewelled gift,
We'll give our lesser offering with a smile,
Nor falter on that path where, all too swift,
You led the way and leapt the golden stile.
Whether new paths, new heights to climb you find,
Or gallop through the unfooted asphodel,
We know you know we shall not lag behind,
Nor halt to waste a moment on a fear;
And you will speed us onward with a cheer,
And wave beyond the stars that all is well.

MAURICE BARING.

The Sonnet Today—And Yesterday 53

spirit. That is the presence to be sought, in the sonnet, as elsewhere, and known, there as elsewhere, by a far light that endures, by a breath upon the cheek.



VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM

Up from the darkness on the laughing stage
A sudden trap-door shot you unawares,
Incarnate Tragedy, with your strange airs
Of courteous sadness. Nothing could assuage
The secular grief that was your heritage,
Passed down the long line to the last that bears
The name, a gift of yearnings and despairs
Too greatly noble for this iron age.
Time moved for you not in quotidian beats,
But in the long slow rhythm the ages keep
In their immortal symphony. You taught
That not in the harsh turmoil of the streets
Does life consist; you bade the soul drink deep
Of infinite things, saying: "The rest is naught."

ALDOUS HUXLEY.

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